Americans who deliberate today are tapping into one of our oldest and most distinctive political practices. In fact, it can even be argued that public deliberation was a major force in creating our country. Deliberative forums, called town meetings, began more than a hundred years before our Revolution and Constitution, paving the way for both.

Deliberative democracy has roots in many cultures and communities, among them, Massachusetts in the 1630s. With its grassy plain running down to the bay, Dorchester, Massachusetts, must have been an excellent place for livestock to graze. But the animals escaped through the fences. That led to two problems: first, how to protect the livestock; and second — the issue behind the issue — how to decide how to protect the livestock. Dorchester had no local government to address such problems. It didn’t even have an established forum for discussing public matters. The only gatherings were in church, and Sunday was not the place to discuss worldly matters as cows and goats.1

It is a shame the events that followed weren’t recorded in great detail. The exact words of the Dorchester townfolk weren’t written down. But we do know that the Reverend John Maverick and other community leaders got together and set a course for American democracy. We can imagine Maverick and fellow colonists saying, “We have a problem. We need to talk about it. Let’s meet on Monday.”

In school, we are taught stirring phrases such as, “Give me liberty or give me death.” But the observation, “We have a problem; let’s talk about it,” should have been preserved as the quintessential American speech. Nearly every American has heard it and said it at one time or another.

**Institutionalizing deliberation**

The incidents that created the first town meetings established a political tradition. Colonists began to meet every month, not just when the cows got out. The Dorchester gathering led to an institution that became a foundation of America’s political system: the town meeting. These early town meetings, however, were not as like today’s town meetings, where officials speak and sometimes answer questions. These were occasions in which people could reflect on and, to use John Adams’ word, “maturely” consider the great questions of the day.

The colonists, then, chose not to adopt (as might have been expected) the English municipal form of government. Instead, they ran (or colony) by town meetings or a “civil body politic.” The meetings had no authority behind them other than the power that came from the promises people made to one another to

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work together. These mutual promises or covenants were the bonds that held the colony together and were the basis for its common endeavors.1

"Committees of correspondence"

Citizens and public bodies continued their influence throughout the revolutionary and constitutional eras. In time, towns in Massachusetts and other colonies formed a network for political action. This network was formalized in 1772, when Samuel Adams established a 21-member "committee of correspondence" to create ties to other towns and to explain the colonists' position "to the world." Within 15 months all but 2 of the colonies had established their own committees of correspondence. In this way, the tradition of talk in the town meetings grew even stronger. And the practice of uniting the small towns, and drawing authority from the people through them, set a powerful political precedent.2

By the time of the American Revolution, public attention had turned to the question of whether a war for independence could be successful against what was then the world's greatest power. John Adams, from the town meetings of Braintree, Massachusetts, took on the task of defending the proposed Declaration of Independence. Adams' faith in the Revolution was grounded in what he had learned about people and the power of their public forums. To those fearing failure in the Revolution he replied: "But we shall not fail. The cause will raise up armies, the cause will create armies. The people, the people, if we are true to them, will carry us, and will carry themselves, gloriously, through this struggle. I care not how fickle other people have been found. I know the people of these Colonies."

Roots of the Constitution

The town meeting tradition prompted Thomas Jefferson to declare that "the vigor given to our revolution in its commencement" had been rooted in "little republics." He believed that these little republics had "thrown the whole nation into energetic action." These forums provided needed time for reflection and deliberation, which — as John Adams told his wife, Abigail — were much needed antitoxins to hasty reactions.

The strength of the town meetings became the strength of the U.S. Constitution. Yet the Constitution doesn't say how the public is to express itself (except, of course, by voting). Thomas Jefferson, sensitive to this omission, encouraged the spread of town meetings through what he called the ward system. He understood that, without places for the public to define its interest and create its own voice, the government could not govern effectively. Although the ward system didn't take hold, town meetings became an American political tradition.

Public deliberation continues today, particularly in the civic and educational organizations that hold National Issues Forums (NIF).

Since 1982, in communities across America, these forums have brought citizens together to deliberate about a wide variety of issues and to begin making the hard choices involved in addressing them.


Forums like these you have just read about in Birmingham, San Francisco, and Grand Rapids are locally sponsored by a diverse network of organizations: neighborhood associations and junior leagues, senior citizens’ centers and elementary schools, leadership programs and literacy programs, churches, and prisons.

**Issue books are starting point**

These organizations often use issue books prepared by the Kettering Foundation, Public Agenda, and other organizations. The books cover subjects important to the nation in every locality—issues like crime, jobs, health care, the environment, education.

*Making Choices Together* draws on what has been learned from thousands of those deliberative forums. It speaks to the questions people ask most often when deciding whether or not to join in public deliberations: Why deliberate? What is public deliberation and how is it different? What actually happens in a forum? What does deliberation produce and does it do any good? There is also a section on where you can go to get involved.
If you asked the early settlers of Dorchester this question, they might simply say "to make decisions about how to solve problems." If you asked that question with the country's entire history in mind, the answer might be that deliberation both created a public for American democracy and allowed that public to define the public's interest. Surely that is a never-ending role for deliberation.

A range of reasons

If you ask the people who go to forums today, you are likely to hear reasons that range from personal growth to changing the political system. Some reasons are personal: They want to learn new decision-making skills they can use as citizens, to understand the issues better, to reconnect to the political process, or to regain a sense of agency. They were tired of being on the outside looking in.

Some people have their community in mind, or the role of their institution in the community. They might say they want to strengthen the civic infrastructure, or they might say their institution was looking for a way to be a catalyst in the community and holding forums made sense, or they were looking for a better way to carry out their organization's mission in the community. Some would say they participate because they care about the common good. Others would tell you they see forums as a way to motivate people to do things in the community.

Many see a connection between what goes on in the community and the tenor of the conversations people have: They wanted a different kind of dialogue, where people could speak "on the same plane" even though they were from different sections of town. Others would say they wanted to be able to formulate their opinions without becoming someone's enemy. They wanted an opportunity to hear other voices.

Changing ways of talking also seems to change relationships, as reflected in the following kinds of comments:

"What you need is a redhead like me and a black fireman over there to come together and talk about crime, and realize the other person is not so bad. We'll... leave talking to each other. The attitude of the whole group will improve."

"A shared destiny"

"The more we get together and talk, the more we discover that we have a shared future and a shared destiny."

Another typical comment is: "We wanted a dialogue that taught respect and we were looking for another way to deal with conflict."

People often come to forums looking for a different way to approach issues and deal with community problems. They say things like: "We were concerned

about issues that weren't being addressed by the community as a whole. We were
tired of having issues framed divisively
and wanted a dialogue that would help
us manage our problems better. We want-
ed to understand the 'gray areas' in issues
framed around absolutes. We wanted to
open up new avenues to do something.
We wanted a way to imagine new possi-
bilities that people would act on, or we
were looking for a 'stepping stone' to
action.

Being concerned about civic action
doesn't preclude creating a better rela-
tionship with government. People say
they are looking for a better way to gov-
ern or a different way to connect to
officials. People also say they deliber-
ate because they want to create a genu-
inely public voice in their community
and they want officials to hear that voice.

Not everyone finds deliberation use-
ful. Some people leave forums frustrated
because their expectations aren't realized
as soon as they thought they would be.
Most, however, believe the effects are
cumulative and are convinced a public
dialogue can have a lasting influence.
And they do want something that will
endure because they don't just want to
make improvements, they want a differ-
ent kind of politics.

If there is any one theme that runs
through these varied comments, it is that
people see problems they think require
more action by more citizens. And they
want better informed public action. They
see deliberation as the first step. One
implication in what they are saying is
that, before people can act together as a
public, they have to be able to decide
how to act together.

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WHAT IS PUBLIC DELIBERATION AND HOW IS IT DIFFERENT?

To increase the chances that our decisions will be wise, we can’t just sound off, argue over solutions, or clarify our values. We have to struggle with the hard choices that every issue entails, considering the pros and cons of each option. That is deliberation in a nutshell. Deliberation helps us know if our decisions are sound — helps us decide if we are willing to accept the consequences of the action we are about to take.

Most political discussions, however, are debates. Stories in the media turn politics into a never-ending series of contests. People get swept into taking sides; their energy goes into figuring out who or what they’re for or against.

Deliberation is different. It is neither a partisan argument where opposing sides try to win nor a casual conversation conducted with polite civility. Public deliberation is a means by which citizens make tough choices about basic purposes and directions for their communities and their country. It is a way of reasoning and talking together.

NP deliberations are framed in terms of three or four options for dealing with an issue — never just two polar alternatives. Framing an issue in this way discourages the diatribes in which people lash out at one another with simplistic arguments.

**It is dialogue for weighing, not a debate for winning**

To deliberate is to weigh the benefits and costs of various options based on what is truly valuable to us. Think of the way people used to weigh gold on an old-fashioned scale. How much will each consequence tip the scale? What are the costs and benefits of doing what we want to do? Answering those questions requires a setting in which we can explore and test ideas about how to act.

Deliberation also involves weighing the views of others. Careful listening increases the chances that our choices will be sound because a wide range of people have pooled their experiences and insights. No one person or small group of people has all the experience and insight needed to decide what is best. That is why it is essential for an inclusive group of citizens to combine their perspectives.

While we can’t know for certain that we have made the right decision until we have acted, deliberation forces us to anticipate consequences and ask ourselves whether we would be willing to accept the worst possible case. Deliberation is looking before we leap.

It is about what is most valuable to us, not just facts alone

We have to deliberate to decide how to act in a way that achieves what is most valuable to us. When we are faced with a difficult choice, we try to get all the information we can. Facts certainly aren’t unimportant, and yet they aren’t enough to tell us what we should do. We use deliberation for those questions like, “How should we act?” when there is no fact or certainty that can give us an
answer. Facts tell us what is and we don’t have to deliberate about things we know. When making personal choices, for instance, in deciding whether to marry, no one goes to an encyclopedia and looks under “M.”

So, public deliberation takes us to facts, important as they are, and beyond, to things no book or expert can tell us, and that is what is truly valuable to us in our common life.

We shouldn’t confuse the choices we make about what is most important to us with simple preferences. We are tempted to think of choice as preference because citizens are often treated as though they are political consumers. Picking a candidate or voting in a referendum appears to be much like picking a brand of toothpaste or cereal. When we prefer, we consult our tastes. The consequences are not too great; we can always switch brands. Choice — the kind of decision we make when we marry someone or decide on a career — causes us to dig deeper. Because the consequences are great, we have to think carefully about what they might be and whether or not we can accept them. We have to look inside ourselves to determine what is most valuable to us. These decisions will have serious, long-term consequences.

In making public choices, we seem to be motivated by a reservoir of things that have great meaning in our common life, our deepest concerns and convictions. These are the ends for which we live — such as the security of our families. They are also means or ways of behaving that we cherish — such as having the freedom or opportunity to realize our goals. Few people are unmoved by such considerations.

For example, the issue of terrorism revolves around a very basic concern: security. We are influenced, however, by different notions of security. We value the security that comes from the willingness to take immediate action against all threats; we also value the security that comes from maintaining a strong defensive shield to ward off danger. And we value the security that comes from being on good terms with those who seek to harm us.

Most people are motivated at least to some degree by all three of these notions of security. Most people feel more secure if they are stronger than their enemies or if they feel well protected from them. And most of us would rather be on relatively friendly terms with someone who is a potential threat.

In deliberating on what to do about terrorism, we become painfully aware that we can’t be guided by all these considerations and have a coherent consistent policy. We have to make decisions in light of competing motives.

A prerequisite to deliberation: Naming and framing issues in public terms

We can’t begin to make effective choices about how to act until we develop a deliberative framework. It must do two things: It must name the problem in public terms — that is, in a way that resonates with us. And it must capture diverse approaches to the problem, approaches that call attention to our everyday concerns.

Unfortunately, Americans often find problems named in a “foreign” language — in technical, expert, highly partisan, or ideological terms. A wide gap often separates the way issues are presented and the way people experience them. This makes it difficult for citizens to see a connection to what they hold dear.

Here is an example of the different take citizens often have on an issue: In the case of stopping the spread of drugs, people tend to see the problem as a family matter rather than simply a matter of enforcing the law or preventing drugs from entering the country. The problem brings into play deep concerns about the
decline of the family and the loss of personal responsibility. That perspective influences the way people "name" the problem. And the name we give a problem influences how we approach it; the name determines who will be available to deal with it and shapes the response that will emerge.

Finding out how the public sees a problem is also the key to finding out how citizens can "get their hands on" problems that require action. As in the case of drugs, when people find things they can do personally through their families or through common action, they are energized by a sense of possibility.

Naming a problem in public terms for common reference gives us a place to begin deliberation, but it masks the conflicts we have about how to deal with the problem. We must confront our conflicting motives — the many things we consider truly valuable and that pull us in different directions when we have to decide how to act. We must frame the various approaches to dealing with a problem in a way that allows us to confront and work through our inner conflicts as well as conflicts among us. Dealing with these conflicts or tensions makes choice work difficult.

For example, when it comes to our health, we want the best care, and we also want the most affordable care. Yet the better the care technically, the more costly and less affordable it is. Any policy for dealing with the costs of technically advanced health care runs squarely into this dilemma. Every option we come up with on this and similar issues will have both positive and negative implications for what we hold dear.

The conflicts we have to deal with in making choices together aren't just conflicts between different individuals or interests, as in environmentalists opposing developers or conservatives opposing liberals. People in one of those camps are not likely to be in the other. When it comes to the things most important to human beings, however, most of us are often in the same camp. Recall the terrorism example and the common motives that surface in that issue.

Despite sharing political motivations, however, different people order and apply what they find valuable in different ways. Imagine it is Friday night. You come home from work late, dead tired. Your spouse, who also had a difficult week, wants to go out to dinner. Your children want you to take them to the movies. Your mother-in-law calls and...
invites you over for dinner. And no sooner have you put down the phone
that your boss calls and asks if you
would come back to the office for two
more hours. Your marriage, your children,
your job, and your mother-in-law are all
valuable, but you still have to decide
what you should do as a family or this
particular evening. You can’t resolve the
dilemma by doing away with one of the
things you hold dear. And you can’t do
everything everyone asks of you. What is
more, there is no authority that can give
you the “right” answer. You can’t escape
the dilemma of considering the circum-
stances, on the one hand, and what you
think is most important, on the other, and
then doing the hard work of finding the
best fit.

That is very much like the dilemma
we face in public life when making a
policy choice. There is no escaping
contradictory pulls and tugs, no escaping
the constraints on what we can do — and
no escaping the feelings that arise from
such dilemmas.

While these conflicts are unavoidable,
deliberation helps us recognize that the
tensions are not so much between us as
among and even within us. That helps
us “work through” the strong emotions
that are part of any major decision.

"Working through" limitations:
Combining reason and emotion

The term “work through” aptly
describes what we do in making choices:
we have to get past our initial reactions
and reach a point where we are again in
enough control to make sound choices
about our future. As we face up to conse-
quences, we often react with a sense of
shock akin to the sense of loss people
feel in the face of personal crisis. Daniel
Yankelovich, noted survey researcher, tells
the story of a man in his mid-fifties who
learns that he will not receive the pension
he had been counting on for his retire-
ment. At first he is angry, incredulous,
suspicious, and depressed. Nonetheless,
over time, he regains his composure by
“working through” the crisis. He might
find an alternative source of income or
make some tradeoffs so he can live on
less. In any event, he reorients his think-
ing and emerges from the emotional
storms in ways that make it possible for
him to act in his best interest.

In public deliberation, people have to
work through comparable difficulties
inherent in all policy decisions. This work
requires talking through, not just talking
about issues.

MAKING CHOICES TOGETHER